

DRAFT

Notes for McGill Management Forum Panel Discussion

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More than two years ago now, on the afternoon of August 24, 1992, Mechanical Engineering Professor Valery Fabrikant marched into the offices of Concordia University's Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science. Within minutes he brutally murdered four of his colleagues, wounded a secretary he had known for years, and threatened the lives of two hostages. People throughout the University were thrown into shock, but they had no time for mourning. In many cases they had to face the most daunting professional challenge of their lives.

My comments today are an account of some of what we learned from that experience. Although I obviously look at things from a public relations perspective, I hope that my thoughts will provide concrete suggestions for all of you —

irrespective of which department you work in here at McGill. Hopefully, my comments will be just as relevant to people in the Registrar's Office, Treasury or Human Resources as they are to staff in the Physical Plant or a Dean's Office. The point is you should all be thinking about how to prepare yourselves for "the unthinkable" — should some terrible event ever happen on this campus.

My basic premise today is that detailed crisis plans are fine as far as they go, but in emergencies you often need the support of people whose names or functions may be overlooked by even the most careful advance planning.

Because every campus is different, determine who those people might be, and remember that they probably won't be department heads. So get to know the right people, and work hard to develop trust between your unit and theirs, so that in a crisis situation they will work as hard for you as members of your own staff.

The basic flaw with all-purpose emergency response plans is that they may foresee every eventuality but one, and if happens to be your bad luck that that particular eventuality is the one that turns up on your doorstep, then the crisis blueprint won't have served much purpose.

Obviously everyone should at least have a list of phone

numbers with the key players to contact if a 747 should crash into the Arts Building.

But, if the Concordia shootings taught me anything, it is that you have to take every crisis as it comes, use your experience and basic common sense, and take it from there.

Concordia, by the way, does have a very impressive set of red-coloured binders called "Emergency Response Manuals." They come in various sizes (depending on where you sit in the hierarchy) and they contain varying sets of instructions — again, depending on what it is that you are expected to do in the event of a major incident.

Although Concordia's manuals were prepared after the killings of 14 women at École Polytechnique, they still tend to concentrate more on things like chemical spills and fires than they do on acts of violence.

In any event, to the best of my knowledge not a single person who was involved in the aftermath of the Concordia killings ever consulted the emergency manuals.

The advice I want to give you, then, is rather than relying entirely on weighty master plans for the whole University bureaucracy, stick to drawing up your own personal list of names and phone numbers, the ultimate "little black book," to get you through your day or week from hell.

The key sets of players for me in August 1992 were the

Security Department, the Chaplain's Office (what we call our Campus Ministry), the University's Employee Assistance Team, and our Human Resources Department.

As far as Security goes, I would advise you to get to know as many of the front line people in your Security Office as you can, and work to win their trust.

In August 1992, I was the last or second-to-last person into the Henry F. Hall Building before the police sealed the doors.

Faculty, students and staff were pouring into the lobby as the evacuation continued from the higher floors of the 14-storey building.

Basically, it was controlled mayhem. Ambulances were descending from everywhere and the stretchers were flooding in from the sidewalks. The gunman, as far as anyone knew, was still prowling the hallways and might turn up at any second.

The police were armed to the teeth — their guns drawn. You couldn't hear yourself think over the din of the sirens and the walkie-talkies, and in the middle of all of this the police officer in charge gave the order to clear the whole area of anyone whose presence wasn't essential.

Concordia's Security Director, a young man in his 30s, was facing the biggest challenge of his career. He looked

around, took a split second to make up his mind, and then picked out four people who could stay.

Those four people were his own boss, the Vice-Rector (what you would call the Vice-Principal) responsible for security operations; the assistant to that same Vice-Rector; the acting Rector (because our Rector was away on his summer vacation) and me. Everyone else was unceremoniously ushered out.

I was probably allowed to stay because our department had made a conscious effort a few years earlier to get to know the security staff, and to help them with their sometimes uncomfortable dealings with the media, particularly the student press. For the most part they trust my department now.

A few years earlier that same Security Director might just as easily have told old Whittingham here to go out and baby-sit the mob of reporters standing behind the police lines. Had that happened, I would have been cut off from the only authoritative source of information about what was happening, or from helping in a small way to influence the decisions being taken by the Vice-Rector and the Acting-Rector, both of whom, as I said, were allowed to stay inside near the command post that the police had established in the lobby.

The point I want to make is that had the head of police

operations on the scene given me the heave ho, there wouldn't have been time to argue.

I'd like you to try to appreciate what the conditions were like then — and could be like here. Victims were being treated on stretchers right there in the lobby. They had bloody wounds, and it looked like a scene right out of the old M.A.S.H. television show.

In an emergency like that the police and ambulance crews have no time for discussion. Orders are barked out, and precious seconds — no more than that — are all that are allowed for what we would normally call reflection about how to proceed.

Depending on your function, you have to try to stay close enough to find out what is going on, but you have to realize, too, that when lives are at stake, if you are not part of the fire, police or Urgences Santé teams, you are way down there on your list of priorities. If you haven't already earned the trust of your Security Chief you aren't going to have an opportunity to do it in the middle of a what looks like a war zone.

Having lived through that bloody rampage two years ago, I would also suggest that you get to know the police officials who will likely invade your campus in the event of a tragedy.

That means the Lieutenant or Captain at the police station serving this district. Depending on your function you might also want to get to know the police community relations officers.

The reason I say this is that even if your institution has a crisis plan, in situations involving killings or hostage takings, or any life-threatening action, the police control everything. They move in like steamrollers and will quite literally bulldoze you, your Principal, the Chairman of the Board of Governors or anybody else in their way — right off onto the sidelines.

It will be the police, not you, nor your institution, who will make the life and death decisions. The only person they will likely talk to is your Security Chief. For that reason I suggest that you ask your Head of Security to arrange these "get-acquainted" sessions with local police officials, and ensure that your security representatives come along to the meeting.

Remember, too, that the attitude that your Security Chief displays towards you now will probably be reflected in the way police treat you during an emergency, so the more that you get to know each other and learn what each of your jobs will be in a crisis situation, the smoother things will go if that horrible day ever arrives.

By the way, getting in behind the police lines proved

invaluable to Concordia for several reasons. Although we weren't allowed to release the names of the dead until the families had been contacted, the information I was phoning in from the Hall Building lobby allowed the University to confirm, for instance, that no students had been killed or injured.

The wild rumours that newspeople were circulating on the radio were incredible. Someone said that the Dean of Engineering and Computer Science had been killed; others put the number of dead and wounded at 10 or more. My staff was able to correct these erroneous reports one by one, and gradually, after the first couple of hours, we became the authoritative source of information. Again, that would not have been possible if someone wasn't behind the lines — right there at the police command centre.

Sending back those reports allowed Concordia to calm the fears of hundreds and hundreds of parents, friends and relatives who were jamming the phone lines for news of their family members.

From a strictly practical point of view, the information that I provided from behind the lines gave the University a tremendous head start as we began the awful task of writing obituaries for the dead professors and making all kinds of other arrangements, which I will describe shortly.

Concordia probably saved a good two hours or more doing

this — and those two hours were of enormous importance later in the evening as the senior administration tried to regroup and prepare for the public questioning that took place at a news conference about 9:30 p.m.

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Here are some other hints for you. Get to know the good folks at your chaplaincy services. They are the ones who will likely provide liaison with victims' families.

Chaplains are not just important when deaths are involved, either. Their expertise can be invaluable in a whole range of traumatic situations, including cases of rape and hostage takings. Priests, rabbis and ministers are also indispensable in helping to arrange memorial services, or to control media access, and crowds generally, at church services. To bypass them is to risk having the public and the media invade religious services, thereby destroying any sense of decorum and unleashing the wrath of your superiors, shocked family members, and disgusted friends and colleagues.

Point Number Two. Meet with your legal staff before something happens to determine what type of information is confidential and what isn't. You may be used to dealing with people you've known for years in the Principal's Office,

or the Registrar's Office or one of the Dean's Offices, but what do you do if you find yourself on the phone at 10:00 o'clock at night with a stranger from a government regulatory agency, or the media, or a cabinet minister's office demanding answers right then and there. You may not have the luxury of telling her or him to wait until morning when you can get clearance about what to say.

Point Three. Decide in advance who on your staff is best suited to handle the phones and who should go in behind police lines, or into the danger area. Once there, that person could be incommunicado for quite some time.

Point Four. Decide in advance which of your office phone numbers to give out to provide information — either to the public or anyone else. This may seem obvious, but the location of the actual phone is important. Depending on your unit's role in the crisis, that phone could be ringing non-stop, so it should be located in an area where it doesn't totally disrupt other office operations. Make sure that it does not block the main entry point to your office, or block your photocopy or fax machine, and remember that some privacy may be essential as you have to conduct emotional conversations with grieving or hysterical family members.

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At Concordia we were lucky enough, if "lucky" is not too obscene a word to use, to have the killings occur in mid-afternoon.

Had the shootings happened in the evening when the Human Resources staff were unavailable, or had the shootings involved students instead of faculty and staff, the University would never have compiled the information it needed as quickly as we did, and we quite literally would have been eaten alive by the press.

As it was, we were, on the whole, treated very sympathetically by the media — at least during the first few days, and I believe that this was due in large measure to the co-operative attitude and air of "transparency" (to use the popular buzzword) that Concordia conveyed to the public from the first moments after the shootings. No matter what department you work in here at McGill — try to convince your superiors that transparency is essential. The truth always comes out in the end, anyway, so you are far better off being forthright than appearing to be covering up. You'd be surprised, sometimes, how much sympathy you get from telling the truth.

Most importantly, always remember that your day-to-day work may not necessarily bring you into regular contact with the circle of people you'll actually have to rely on should the bullets ever start flying.

Don't rely solely on your status within the hierarchy, or assume that your good relations with such-and-such a Director, or this or that Vice-Principal, will automatically translate into a speedy response from the staff in their departments.

If you report to a different Vice-Principal than the office you are dealing with at 1:00 in the morning, your name may not even appear on their after hours emergency telephone list. Don't assume that they will know who you are or be willing to go the extra mile for you just because YOU say it is important.

What you need is not the home phone number of the Director of Human Resources, but the name of the file clerk or computer operator who knows how to access the personnel files with all the information you want.

What you also need is someone who trusts you and your staff sufficiently to give you the kind of information that under normal circumstances might be categorized as confidential, such as the name of a victim's spouse, or even whether there are children in the family.

As I just said, you don't want to be arguing with someone quoting "proper procedures" to you or citing clauses from the "Freedom to Information Act" when you've got the Ministry of the Environment, or CBC national news staff demanding information on the other line.

WHAT CONCORDIA DID ON THAT FIRST EVENING

We had our senior people prepped and in front of the cameras at 9:45 p.m., about three hours after the bodies had been removed from the Hall Building. The Acting-Rector provided all of the information that we had at that time.

Our most pressing concern, however, was not for the public, but for the internal community. We began working with the people from our Employee Assistance Programme to organize public assemblies on both campuses the day following the shootings (**FIRSTLY**) to tell all our faculty, students and staff what counseling services were available; (**SECONDLY**) to encourage them to take advantage of those services; and (**LASTLY**) to encourage people to urge their friends and colleagues to seek help if they sensed people were feeling overwhelmed by all that had happened.

Concordia immediately sought help from other Montréal-area EAP Programmes because we didn't have enough counselors of our own to handle the demand.

The University prepared a letter for the Rector to issue to the entire Concordia community the moment that he returned to campus. That letter was posted in every department on both campuses.

Following a second news conference, the University organized a general assembly presided over by the entire senior administration and the Acting President of the Faculty Association. (I say acting because the President, Professor Mike Hogben, had been one of those killed in the shootings).

The purpose of that assembly was to show that the senior administration was united and on top of things. The five senior people and the Acting Faculty President attempted to answer questions, put an end to some of the recriminations about "why hadn't someone done something to prevent the shootings from happening in the first place," and basically show that the senior leadership was itself hurting, and very concerned for the welfare of everyone at Concordia.

My most vivid memory of that public gathering is the sight of one of our Vice-Rectors shedding tears. That emotion — more than any of our written statements or news releases — expressed the human side of the tragedy for everyone. Despite the divisions that most people knew existed among the senior leadership, I believe that that public assembly went a long way toward minimizing fears and restoring confidence at all levels that somebody was in charge of the situation.

In closing, let me say that if I have left anyone with the

impression that I have no appreciation or understanding of the benefits of University-wide emergency planning, or University-wide advance planning, let me qualify that somewhat by saying that while I have less faith in the value of crisis binders, I do believe in issues management — or as it is sometimes called, environmental scanning.

These days, for people like us, that could mean issues as wide-ranging as date rape, animal rights, research impropriety, financial mismanagement, sexual harassment by faculty and staff, or maybe the closing down of whole departments or Faculties because of economic pressures.

To prepare for these eventualities you should put your time and energy into thinking how you can obtain the information that your unit might be called on to provide about these hot issues, but don't waste your time publishing binders that basically repeat — albeit in one place — names and numbers and job titles that already exist in other formats.

Think ahead. Develop two or three scenarios like a mass shooting, or a hostage taking, or a chemical spill or a plane crash right here on the lower campus, or at MacDonald (check spelling) College, or up at Martlett House, or wherever, and try to figure out (first) what kind of information your unit would likely need to get its hands on to deal with other university departments, the public, the press, alumni, students or family members; (second)

determine who is best placed to provide that information to you; and then (third) build up your own personal network of these people. Clarity of thinking is what is important. Any properly trained staff should be able to do the rest.